

THE PERIL OF THE CHRISTMAS LEGEND.

BY GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT.

A HISTORICAL character has a right to be historically understood. No one, not even his most intimate friend, can be held blameless who hides one iota of fact with a veil of romance. This is especially true in the case of those historical characters who founded the great religions of mankind. What concerns us so intimately and comprehensively as our religious faith ought, for the sake of our manhood, to have a basis not of fancy but of fact.

Among the great prophets of earth no one is better entitled to an absolutely impartial historical portrayal than is Jesus. He concealed nothing, he misinterpreted nothing, and he laid down his life to seal the truth of his words. He taught with unparalleled power the duty of reality, of sincerity, of truthfulness before God and man. Nothing stirred his indignation so deeply as sham and quackery in religion. It is peculiarly fitting, therefore, that the followers of Jesus should tell the truth about him, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Not only is this demanded by proper respect for the character of Jesus, it is also urgently demanded by regard for the true welfare of his millions of followers. Whatever doctrine or rite obscures the historical truth about him is in so far unworthy to be called Christian.

Now the Christmas legend is such a doctrine. It obscures the truth. Children who hear this legend read as history grow up with a fundamentally wrong conception of Jesus. We say "fundamentally" wrong, not *totally* wrong, without any truth whatsoever. That Jesus was of humble parentage and sprang from the Galilean village of Nazareth there is no reason to doubt; but these elements are quite inconspicuous in the story of his origin. What stands in the foreground is a series of supernatural events which absorb the reader's attention and determine his conception of Jesus. Of this series the first event, which makes all the subsequent ones easy of

belief, is that Jesus had no human father, but, like many of the Greek and Roman heroes, was sprung from an earthly mother who had conceived in a supernatural manner. He was begotten of God.

It is not the purpose of the present article to give the grounds on which one is constrained to regard this as a legend, but only to set forth the serious peril that is wrapped up in it.

The Christian religion differs notably from other great religions in this respect that the teaching of Jesus is perfectly illustrated by his own character and life. To speak in a paradox, he was himself the first Christian. It was his aim to show men the way to the Father, to show by word and example what it is to be and to live as a child of God. He did not give himself to his followers as an object of worship, but as a prophet of the true worship of God. It was only as men lost sight of the teaching of the Master in word and in life that they began to regard him as an object of worship by the side of God. In the light of the oldest sources, in the light of all the well-attested words of Jesus, we cannot doubt that this rendering to him of divine worship on the part of his followers would have been regarded by him with unspeakable sorrow and profound abhorrence. As one who himself worshiped God, he could only have regarded this attitude of his followers as idolatrous.

Now the Christmas legend taken as history renders it impossible to regard Jesus as the ideal of Christian manhood. It clearly vitiates his humanity, and thus undermines the significance of his temptation and of all his struggle to be a perfect exponent of the will of God. The Christmas legend makes Jesus a *tertium quid*. He is not a purely human son of his mother nor a purely divine son of his alleged Father. He cannot possibly become the ideal man for he has not sprung out of the common human soil. His achievement of character can never be held up as an unmixed encouragement to struggling human spirits because his antecedents were radically unlike those of all truly human spirits. His belief in the fatherhood of God is not proof that men and women can attain that belief, for men and women, first and last, are sprung from human fathers, but he, according to the legend, was not.

The Christmas legend in making Jesus a *tertium quid* strips him at once and forever of all possible significance as an example. It takes him out of the ranks of struggling humanity, and sets him on a *niveau* remote and strange, where he has as companions no one of his mother's race but only the unreal beings of pagan legend,

as Perseus and Hercules, or historical characters like Alexander and Augustus who have been sublimated into the realm of legend.

Thus by the Christmas legend Jesus is wounded in the house of his friends. His influence with his own people, the Jews, was seriously crippled by his death as a malefactor, but this was of small account as compared with the injury done to his name by representing him as a demi-god. Doubtless this injury was less in ancient times than it is at present, for when men scarcely discriminated between the historical and the legendary it did not matter so much that legends were woven around the historical Jesus, especially as they were inspired by love and a sincere desire to honor his name. It may be that the Christmas legend even furthered the acceptance of the new religion among the Greeks and Romans in the age when it originated; but if so, this acceptance was dearly bought. It has always been easy to find acceptance for a Christianity that is sufficiently adulterated to suit the fancy or gratify the desires and lusts of men. But for the modern world in which there is a growing sense of the sacredness of God's laws and the sacredness of truth, associated with an immeasurable increase of knowledge of his laws both physical and spiritual—for this world, we say, the legendary elements that early found their way into the canonical Gospels are a stumbling-block and a snare. Some men, offended by these legendary accretions, cast the entire Gospel overboard, and commiserate the intellectual immaturity of the church. Others accept the legendary elements as actual history and thus help to perpetuate, in the twentieth century, conceptions of God and man which are Greek rather than Jewish and which are hostile to the essence of the Gospel. A few are learning to discriminate between the legendary and the historical.

But this is not all. The peril contained in the Christmas story is not exhausted when we say that this story conveys a fundamentally wrong conception of Jesus. Intimately associated with this are two other features of the subject which are no less practical in character.

In the first place, the Christmas legend introduces into the Gospel a conception of God which can not now maintain itself. It represents him as arbitrarily breaking in upon his own established order of working. For tens of thousands of years he had been developing the human race from within. He had by slow degrees brought it up to the first rude beginnings of civilization, then onward through many centuries until man had gained the heights of knowledge and power which we see in the ancient Egyptian and Assyrian empires. Above the level of the cave-dwellers there had

arisen a Cheops and a Nebuchadnezzar, a David and a Julius Cæsar. Out of a race in whom was only a vague and dread awe of the unseen forces of nature there had been developed an Abraham who was called the friend of God and a Socrates who stepped fearlessly forth into the unknown, trusting in the gods and his own good conscience. But there is no reason apparent why the method and means of progress which had obtained in the rise from the cave-dweller to Abraham and Socrates were not adequate to the rise from Socrates and Abraham to Jesus of Nazareth. According to the words of Jesus himself he was a prophet of the Most High, and his teaching differs from that of an Isaiah and Jeremiah as the work of a supreme master from that of his pupils.

What occasion therefore was there to depart from that method of progress under which man had risen out of the darkness and mire of the savage into the light and nobility of a Plato and an Epictetus, a Joseph and a Samuel? Had God known of a better way by which humanity could attain such purity and strength as we see in Jesus than the way he had pursued with his children for thousands of years, then he must have adopted that better way. Why the painful struggle of humanity through untold millennia to climb part way up the mount of goodness and divine knowledge if it was the purpose of God to carry the race by a single miraculous bound from the half-way point to the summit?

No, the Christmas legend makes God a God of confusion. He is not the God whose unchanging counsels we see in human history and throughout the well-ordered system of the universe.

But, once more, the Christmas legend not only brings discord into God's harmony, but it is also practically objectionable because it introduces an element of vagueness and unreality into the very fountain of our religion.

From the record of his public ministry it is clear that Jesus was no friend of vagueness in morals and religion. He saw clearly, and wished his disciples to see as he saw. God was neither unreal nor vague to him, and his vision of man's mission in the world was just as clear as his vision of God. The Christian faith and the Christian life when oriented by the faith and life of Jesus are definite and positive. Their dominant note is reality. But in this respect the Christmas legend is not in accord with the historical Jesus. When we go back from the story of his life, which story makes us feel that he is one with us, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and when we see him through the shimmering veil of the story of his birth, then he escapes from us into the realm of the

unintelligible and the unreal. We can no longer see into his heart, or believe that he knows by experience how it seems to face temptation and to lift up a prayer to the unseen Father. We can not come near to him: he is vague and unreal. We can not conceive of a being who was born of a mother like ours but whose paternity was not of earth.

But if the Christmas legend thus brings an element of vagueness and unreality into our thought of the founder of Christianity, it is quite obvious that it infects Christianity throughout its length and breadth with poison of unreality and vagueness. What colors the fountain colors the stream. If Jesus himself is unreal, then his life is unreal, and his relation to God is tinged with unreality. But if his own religion is somewhat unreal, shall the religion of his followers, if they are indeed his *followers*, escape the taint of unreality?

It is doubtless a serious matter to bring a sweeping accusation against an important section in two of our oldest Christian documents, but it is not half so serious as to believe an untruth. The question is, shall we deal fairly with Jesus? Shall we judge him in the light of his own words and life, or by the fancies of early disciples?

Books have recently appeared which seek to show that Jesus never lived. Would such books have been written had not the church long read as history certain parts of the Gospel which are now recognized as legendary, and had it not in other ways obscured the historical Jesus? We may freely say that the Jesus of these legendary sections never did exist. We may say that the Jesus as portrayed in the great mass of Christmas poetry from Ephraim of Edessa down to the magazine poems of the present year never lived. We may also say that Jesus as analyzed and presented to faith by the Greek theologians of the early church never existed. But who can seriously question that back of the Sermon on the Mount there was a prophet unapproached in the purity and power of his teaching, that underneath the Christian movement of the first century there was a great personality who profoundly stirred the hearts and minds of men, and that the early Christian consciousness of the nearness and goodness of God and the early Christian eagerness to spend and be spent in the service of mankind resulted from contact with some one to whom the nearness and goodness of God were absolute verities and in whom the spirit of service was a consuming passion?

The historical Jesus can never accomplish his mission in the earth while the church persists in hiding him under the veil of legend. Let his birth be rescued from the realm of fiction and be made as

real as the boat in which he once slept on the Lake of Galilee. Let it be understood in harmony with his life and in harmony with the working of God throughout history and throughout the universe. If we thereby lose a legend of the second or third Christian generation, we shall gain what is more beautiful, the simple truth that Jesus, the supreme prophet and revealer of God, sprang out of the common soil of humanity.